

Information, Local Government and Community Development



Edited by
C. Prince Udochukwu Njoku

Information, Local Government and Community Development

A collection of revised seminar papers

Edited by

C. Prince Udochukwu Njoku

MLS, PGDip. Information Systems, BSc (Hons) Ed



Nigeria Information & Documentation Network
1998

Published in Nigeria by
Nigeria Information & Documentation Network
Chiene Street. Achara Layout
Enugu

© Nigeria Information & Documentation Network 1998

ISBN: 978-026-014-1

Printed by
SAN Press
By Igbariam Bus-Stop
Agbani Road
Enugu

No part of this book can be reproduced or distributed for
commercial purpose without prior written permission
from the publisher.

CONTENTS

	Page
Preface	v
CHAPTER ONE: Information and Governance: How Related? by C. Prince Udochukwu Njoku	1
CHAPTER TWO: Closing the Information Gap Between Government and the People by Uche Nnadozie	5
CHAPTER THREE: How to Make the Most Effective Use of the Mass Media in Governance by Eddy Agwuegbo	11
CHAPTER FOUR: Importance, Establishment and Maintenance of Community Information Centres by C. Prince Udochukwu Njoku	23



Preface

This book is an outcome of a seminar on "Information strategies for successful grassroots governance" held in Enugu, Nigeria, on 3-5 August 1996, for local government chairmen, their information officers and supervisory councillors for education in Nigeria. It came out of the need to extend the knowledge to all persons who, now or in future, have roles to play in providing information for people, especially the grass roots.

The papers were delivered by experts in information provision/dissemination (specialists in broadcast/print journalism, mass mobilization and community library/information centre management. They were revised to make them suitable for a book and very useful to the target audience at all times.

Readers who will find this book of great importance include librarians and other information services providers; managers in development organizations and aid agencies; broadcasters; newspaper journalists, and workers in ministries of local government, education, information, women/youth affairs and community development. Students and teachers of library/information science, mass communication, public administration/local government and development studies will also find the book very useful.

CHAPTER ONE

Information and Governance: How Related?

C. Prince Udochukwu Njoku

MLS, PGDip. Information Systems, BSc (Hons) Ed
Head: Planning, Training, Research & Statistics
Department, Enugu State Library Board

Can we accept that in governance, there can be success and there can be failure? Can we accept that in governance, the leader must know the territory, the needs, the economics, and success killers? Can we accept that it is only when the leader has knowledge as in the preceding sentence that he or she can develop appropriate strategies for success? If the last two questions are not very clear, they can be reframed this way: Why is it that in spite of a leader's sleepless nights towards developing his or her area to make life meaningful for people, the people can be apathetic and even cynical to the leader's policies, plans and projects?

An editorial in *Nigerian Tribune* of 30 June 1986 proffered the answer below.

No nation [or leader] can effectively realize its [or his/her] stated objectives and aims if those for whom the policies are intended are not properly informed and mobilized to play their set roles.

This is why we must mobilize people at the grassroots by constant information.

The above assertion was made in support of Prince Tony Momoh's¹ pronouncement that information centres should be created throughout Nigeria for public enlightenment at the grassroots. Also, according to a news story,² a one-time commissioner for Information and Home Affairs in Kaduna State announced sometime ago as follows:

The government places much emphasis on information dissemination to enlighten the people and win their support in the quest for rapid economic and social development.

Without doubt, information is a commodity, which must be produced, packaged, distributed and used. It is a need comparable with other basic human needs.³ Moreover, it is a right, and unless there is equilibrium in its demand and supply, its potentials will not fully manifest. The result is usually under-development of both individuals and communities, since they cannot choose the best courses of action in terms of their own interests without relevant, accurate and sufficient information. In fact, according to a UNESCO research in 1983, many development plans of many developing countries fail because

those plans were not based on relevant information. It was either that the information was not available or that available information was not utilized. This situation has not changed significantly today.

From the foregoing, it is clear that information has close relationship with governance. Lack of information is the real killer of success in governance. If people in government know this, they will commit themselves to those strategies which will enable them to provide information sufficiently and consistently for both themselves and their people. For greater positive impact, citizens as well as government and non-government organisations also ought to acknowledge the importance of information in economic, political, social, cultural and technological development. To stimulate information planning in the context of national goals, means and priorities and to guarantee information flow, co-ordination and utilization, there ought to be a sound information policy at the national level. On their part, the governed—both individuals and organisations—should always seek information relevant to whatever they do. This will help them to avoid repeating other people's mistakes, to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts and to attain excellence in their endeavours.

References / Notes

References / Notes

1. Prince Tony Momoh was the then Minister of Information and Culture.
2. "Kaduna to establish information booths" [a news story]. *The Guardian*, February 12, 1986, p. 16.
3. Alan Hancock. *Communication Planning for Development: An Operational Framework*. Paris: UNESCO, 1981, p. 11.

CHAPTER TWO

Closing the Information Gap Between Government and the People

Uche Nnadozie (Ph.D)

Director: National Orientation Agency (NOA)
Anambra State

Four concepts are basic to this topic. They are :

1. Information;
2. Information dissemination strategies;
3. Information dissemination;
4. Targets (end-users or consumers) of information.

Information and Information Dissemination Strategies

Information as an concept should be regarded here (and this is without any prejudice to other definitions) as the communication or reception of knowledge or intelligence; or knowledge obtained from investigation, study or instruction/lecture. These include news, facts, data or a signal or character (as in a communication system or computer) that represents data or something (such as a message, experimental data or a picture) which justifies change in a construct that represents physical or mental experience of another

construct. On the other hand, information as an academic pursuit or science is the collection, classification, storage, retrieval and dissemination of recorded knowledge treated both as a pure and as an applied science.

With regard to information dissemination strategies, it has to be stated that these depend on a lot of factors. These factors include the aims and objectives of the organisation or agency which issues out the information, the facilities available to the agency or the individuals or the groups directly involved in the dissemination of the information, and the background or level of sophistication of the target audience or end-users. There is little need to explain these factors in detail, as some of them are self-explanatory. For instance, it is obvious that the aims and objectives of an organisation as well as the facilities available in it influence the strategies the organisation will adopt in order to disseminate information to its members and members of the public. This is because the information available in an organisation must be used in such a way as to achieve the organisation's aims and objectives, and availability or lack of facilities plus their sophistication or state (such as their modernity or archaism) affects the particular methods of disseminating the information.

In the same vein, the level of education or poverty of the target audience (as well as the technological sophistication of the organisation)

must be borne in mind in putting up strategies for information dissemination. This is so essentially because the best strategy is intended not only to ensure that the available information reaches the target audience and in time, but also to ensure that the target audience understands, adequately interprets and effectively uses the information.

The Essence of Information Dissemination

At this juncture, it will be helpful to consider very briefly (though elementarily) the concept of information theory. From what had been discussed, it is clear that the science of information is a very sophisticated science. Like any other science, it is based on a theory. It is this theory also that forms its basis and growth. A dictionary definition of the theory suffices here.

Information theory is the theory that deals satisfactorily with information, the measurement of the content in terms of its distinguishing essential characteristics or by the number of alternatives from which it makes a choice possible. It also deals with the efficiency of processes of communication between men and machines (as in telecommunication or in computing). The above definition adequately states the essence of information, which can simply be described as bridging the gap between the government and the people.

If closing the information gap between govern-

ments and the people being governed is the basic essence of information dissemination by governments, certain issues must then be raised and addressed. Two of the most important of these issues are:

(1) Why must the gap be closed?

(2) How can the gap be closed?

In answering the above questions, it must be accepted that in any organisation, agency or body there is the need for information flow to and from its customers. This information flow is more glaring, and the lack of it is more easily and drastically felt, in the public (that is, government) sector than in the private sector.

Why information gap between government and the people must be closed

As is generally known, communication gap between individuals, groups or organisations breeds suspicion, ill-will, rumour mongering, and lack of trust and confidence, among many problems. No human organisation or government can survive long with these problems unsolved. On the other hand, in a group where people are properly informed, these problems are minimized and the group's survival and growth are assured.

How information gap between government and the people can be closed

Some critics had questioned whether information gap between governments and people can ever be closed. The answer is that the problem can be tackled and tackled adequately if serious attention is paid to it. This answer, however, is premised on some assumptions. One of these assumptions is that the government must trust the people and repose adequate confidence in them and their ability to articulate their interests and needs and to tackle their problems. This will create the fundamental enabling environment that will trigger the interaction between those in government and the people they govern. This is necessary because communication or information dissemination is a two-way traffic. Whereas the disseminators make the needed input into the environment, the end-users gather, interpret, dissect and consume the disseminated information, and in the process they make their necessary feedback or inputs which the disseminators appropriately analyze and use. In this whole process, confidence, trust, understanding and love are developed and nurtured between leaders and the led.

Again, government must create the environment in which the above process will thrive. This involves raising the intellectual consciousness of the people by providing qualitative education for the citizenry. It also involves provision of social and recreational facilities—such as television viewing centres in communities / villages. These facilities will, among

other things, provide avenues for social interaction among the people and enable them to gather information, to discuss and exchange views and to react adequately to the information.

Furthermore, it is necessary to state at this juncture that the language used in this whole gamut of information dissemination must be very simple, unambiguous and easily understandable. In this connection, not only is it necessary to use vernacular and the dialects of the people; it is also necessary to talk to the people through their own people. By so doing, the initial hostility, fear and distrust associated with interaction between strangers and the people will be minimized.

Conclusion

The foregoing paragraphs are an attempt to analyze some issues usually raised in any discussion relating to information gap between governments and people being governed. So, the discussion had been essentially on general and broad terms. Not all the questions necessary were answered, and not all the issues raised were exhaustively treated. The paper is actually a sketch intended to elicit other issues and questions and to trigger further discussions.

CHAPTER THREE

How to Make the Most Effective Use of the Mass Media in Governance

Eddy Agwuegbo

Deputy Director (News & Programmes): Enugu
National Station, Federal Radio Corporation of
Nigeria

Introduction

Looking at the theme – “Information Strategies for successful grass roots governance,” one will at once see that it is both relevant to and necessary in our times and circumstances. This is because the grass roots are the cradle of political activity in our society, any effort at studying, understanding and, perhaps, reforming political behaviour and practice that fails to begin from the grass roots—that is, the family units, the wards and the villages—is most likely going to miss its bearing. The grass roots hold the key to a clear understanding of the political activities at national, state and local government levels.

Definition of Terms

THE MASS MEDIA

When we talk about 'the mass media', we are essentially talking about communication, which is the transmission, reception and use of information and other products of mass communication. Many writers and authorities in mass communication have defined, explained and analyzed communication in different ways. Essentially, communication involves giving and receiving information. When people are involved, you have inter-personal or face-to-face communication.

The mass media are the purveyors of information in the society and in today's world. They include radio, television, newspaper, magazine, periodical and film. These organs use their powers to reach mass audiences, sometimes in distant places. Some writers, including Dr. Ikechukwu Nwosu, choose to classify the mass media into two groups, namely: electronic and print media. But whatever class they belong to, they will essentially do the same jobs of informing, educating and entertaining. According to Dr. Ikechukwu Nwosu (in his book: *Mass Media and Marketing Communication*, 1996), the mass media perform the following functions:

- (a) Surveillance of the environment, which means collection and dissemination of information, news or intelligence in their immediate and remote environment;
- (b) Correlation of parts of society in responding to the environment, which involves mainly

interpretation of collected information and recommendation of courses of action based on such interpretation. These are contained in commentaries, editorials and columns.

- (c) Transmission of social heritage from one generation to the next. This involves transmission of knowledge, values and social norms, and is the education function of the media.

Perhaps, a more succinct statement of the functions of the mass media is that by Fredrick Whitney who said thus:

It informs; it keeps one up-to-date. It educates, broadens and deepens one's perspectives. It persuades; it sales goods and services, candidates and opinions. It entertains; it creates laughter; it fills a void; it costs money and it makes money.

One cannot agree any less with Whitney, because his list of what the mass media do is not only comprehensive; it is also convincing.

GOVERNANCE

According to the *Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*, governance refers to the act, fact and manner of governing.

From the above definitions and explanation, it

can be said that the topic of this paper seeks to find out how the services of the mass media can be effectively used to promote the way and manner in which we, as a people or society, are governed.

Role of the mass media in society

Having understood what our topic means, the questions that naturally follow are:

- (d) What has been, is and should be the role of the mass media in our society?
- (e) How far do such roles further or hinder the process of governance in the country?

First, let us examine the role of the mass media in Nigeria. It may be proper to look at this in relation to Ikechukwu Nwosu's broad classification of the mass media into print media and electronic media.

THE PRINT MEDIA

Historically, the first newspaper to be established in Nigeria was *Iwe Irohin*, printed in Yoruba and in English every two weeks by a second-hand press in Abeokuta. It was established by Rev. Henry Townsend of the Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.). At first, *Iwe Irohin* concerned itself with only church business: movement of church officials, baptism, marriages, ordination of priests, as well

as birth and death of church members. Later, its news coverage extended to non-ecclesiastical matters, including news of general interest from outside Abeokuta.

Other newspapers followed *Iwe Irohin* after some years, but their development and growth were epileptic. It was not until 1880 when *Lagos Times* and *Gold Coast Advertiser* appeared that the foundation for a chain of Lagos-based newspapers was laid.

The print media of those days saw themselves, as they still do today, as the watchdog of the society. However, their roles differed, according to Alhaji Alade Odewu (a veteran newspaper editor and columnist). While the colonial-day newspapers were watchdogs against colonialism and imperialism, newspapers of today are watchdogs against indigenous Nigerian elite in government—be they civilian or military.

The 1920s saw the emergence of the Nigerian *Daily Times*, with the late Sir Adeyemo Alakija as chairman and Mr. Ernest Ikoli as editor. It was a period that witnessed the debut of Herbert Macaulay's political organ, the *Lagos Daily News*.

The story of the newspaper in Nigeria will not be complete without the mention of Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe's group of newspapers of the 1930s. When Dr. Azikiwe (Zik) arrived from Accra in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) where he had edited the *African Morning Post*, he set up a chain of newspapers, starting with the *West African Pilot* whose motto was "Show the light and the people

will find the way.”

The newspapers of the colonial period had one thing in common. They championed the nationalist struggle against colonial domination. The Zik newspapers, particularly the *West African Pilot*, carried highly explosive headlines and articles that not only had a mass appeal but also were highly critical of the colonial administration. Most readers valued particularly the column captioned “Inside Stuff” which was written by Zik himself and was read not only for its scathing criticisms but also for the beauty of its grammar.

The point being made here is that historically the print media had discharged those basic functions of providing information, correlating information by way of interpretation, analysis and commentaries, transmitting social heritage through education, and providing entertainment. Today, newspaper articles are used as teaching materials in lecture rooms. Government offices, businesses and most libraries in Nigeria buy newspapers daily to store and to gather information. Besides, in recognition of the enormous power of the print and electronic media (the mass media or the press) to influence changes in behavior and attitude, government agencies partner with them in any effort to sell a new idea or concept to the populace. A few examples will suffice. The famous queue culture under the now defunct War Against Indiscipline

(WAI) campaign, Operation Feed the Nation (OFN), Green Revolution and Palm for Palm campaigns were all made possible largely through government's partnership with the print and electronic media. The current transition programme of the military government has recorded its progress only because the mass media have thrown their weight behind it.

If the print media have had a history of supporting governments' programmes, particularly for attitudinal change, what about the electronic media?

THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

The history of broadcasting in Nigeria dates back to 1951 when the Nigerian Broadcasting Service (NBS) was established as a department of State. After about six years, NBS's service became so highly valued by both the people and the government that the need to raise the status of the organisation from a department of State to a full-fledged public corporation was recognized. Consequently, the Nigeria Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) was born in 1957 and charged "with the sole purpose of providing public broadcasting in the interest of Nigeria."

By a structural re-organisation of NBC, brought about by Decree 8 of April 1978, the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) was created. The decree, which later became an Act of Parliament (No. 8 of 1979) spelt out the functions

of the FRCN. The functions include:

- (a) It should be the duty of the corporation to provide, as a public service in the interest of Nigeria, independent and impartial broadcasting services for general reception within Nigeria and to provide external services for general reception outside Nigeria.
- (b) The corporation shall ensure that the services which it provides, when considered as a whole, shall reflect the unity of Nigeria as a Federation and at the same time give adequate expression to the culture, characteristics, affairs and opinions of each state or other part of the Federation.

The responsibility for external broadcasting has since been divested from FRCN by the decree which established Voice of Nigeria (VON) as a separate public enterprise.

When it is remembered that television broadcasting at the Federal level began as an arm of NBC, it will be appreciated that the rules of broadcasting as spelt out above for NBC (later FRCN) are nearly the same for the Nigeria Television Authority (NTA).

From the foregoing, it is obvious that broadcasting, whether on radio or on television, was from the start conceived as an instrument for the promotion of the unity of the country and projection of the people's culture, norms and values. Operationally, therefore, broadcasting had played a supportive role to the government

and had, in fact, been the main mouthpiece of the government whenever the government wants to direct the people's attitude in one way or another. It is, therefore, not surprising that the electronic media generally (but the FRCN more often than not) is the first target anytime a non-constitutional change in government takes place.

If the mass media had played supportive roles to governments, what exactly are the contents of their messages? Have the messages been generally accepted by the people or the government? To answer in the affirmative will imply that it had been smooth-sailing between the media and the people and between the people and the government. There had been occasional disagreements, particularly during periods of partisan politics when there is a clear line of division between those in government and those outside the government. At such times, the print and electronic media had been accused by those outside the government of leaning too heavily towards the government. Interestingly, some government officials had also complained of being misquoted by mass media personnel. In a few cases, the government had to react harshly by sacking some editors and general managers of government-owned radio and television stations, or giving one punishment or the other to a perceived detractor.

On the part of the people, except in a few isolated cases (again occasioned by difference in political opinions), the mass media had been

identified as veritable instruments for progress and development. For one thing, the media offer a free market for exchange of ideas both between the government and the governed.

Nigeria's 1999 constitution imposes a duty on the mass media to uphold "The Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy." It additionally enjoins the media to uphold the responsibility of accountability of government to the people (Chapter II, No. 21). In carrying out this duty of upholding the responsibility of accountability of government, the media sometimes step on the toes of some highly-placed government officials. But since the stepping on their toes is done in the course of discharging a duty, the media have no other choice than to obey the constitution, as Apostle Peter clearly stated in the Bible (Acts 4: 19), "It's better to listen to God than to man." In the case of the media versus the government officials, the words of the constitution are equated to the voice of God.

As purveyors of information, always keeping surveillance over the environment, analyzing and interpreting information and passing education from one generation to another, the media in Nigeria had proved that they are agents of change and development. There is no doubt that we owe much of the moral and structural development we have in the country to the activities of the mass media. Such developments are even more pronounced in

the socio-political and economic fields. But as Marshall MacLuhan—a mass communication expert—had observed, we cannot for a long time ignore the power of the media to influence actions, attitudes and values. Although other writers had put a question mark on the persuasive power of media messages, there is a great deal of agreement that mass media messages—fashioned in the best tradition of simplicity and devoid of propaganda—will still get people to change to desired behaviour.

Conclusion

The point had been made to show that the mass media—print and electronic—have been playing a supportive role in governance, championing campaigns for disciplined political culture, high morality and good behaviour by all Nigerians. Any casual observer of mass media performance will agree that nearly every policy statement by the government, the private sector and even religious bodies is made through the mass media.

Without the mass media, it will be difficult for the business of governance to be carried out successfully. In realization of this fact, the military always run to radio and television houses when they take over power. They do this in order to win acceptance.

Local governments should always go to radio, television, newspapers and magazines to pass on information to their people about what the governments plan to do, are doing and want the

people to do. They should think of helping to fund the mass media or finding other ways to help the media houses to replace obsolete equipment, reduce production cost and improve staff conditions of service in order to get best and continuous coverage from the mass media.

Again, it should be noted that mass media messages are highly perishable, especially those of the electronic media. Radio and television messages are good and remembered when they are fresh, but after a few days there is hardly an agreement on the details of a particular news broadcast. This is because such messages are not preserved. With the advent of audio and video cassettes and recorders, radio and television broadcasts can now be easily preserved. Community information centres or community libraries should be set up by local governments and constantly funded to monitor, record and preserve radio and television broadcasts and announcements and periodically replay them to the people for continuous sensitization and mobilization. Nigeria Information and Documentation Network and other relevant organisations which care can partner with the local governments in this regard. Preserved radio and television information can be very useful research materials.

CHAPTER FOUR

Importance, Establishment and Maintenance of Community Information Centres

C. Prince Udochukwu Njoku

MLS, PGDip. Information Systems, BSc (Hons) Ed

Head: Planning, Training, Research & Statistics

Department, Enugu State Library Board

Importance of Community Information Centres

In all aspects, the importance of an information centre cannot be clearly isolated from the importance of information. It is very useful, therefore, for one to understand the value of information in human life for one to appreciate substantially the place of an information centre in a community.

There is a general saying that knowledge is power. Yet the body of knowledge a man possesses is the sum of pieces of information which he assimilates. Without doubt, great discoveries which have transformed the world were results of knowledge. This knowledge derived from information, and the information was communicated either through speech (words), writing, visual representation or through action.

By whatever means information is passed on or received, it "is intangible but like the electric current, its end results are quite evident."¹ One of the most significant end-results of information is a change in a man's attitudes and courses of action. For instance, if Musa hears or reads that Okoro his friend is a rogue, Musa's attitude toward Okoro is most likely to change. Musa may start avoiding Okoro's company. His apartment may no longer be as accessible to Okoro as it hitherto was. So, in all our activities in life, success rests largely on availability of information which forms the appropriate knowledge upon which we act.

Information is, therefore, a commodity which must be produced, packaged, distributed and used. It is, moreover, a need, which Alan Hancock² said is comparable with other basic human needs, but I am saying it is above them, because it determines how well those other needs are met; in fact, whether they would be met at all depends on information input. The importance of information centres which provide the much needed information then demands more critical assessment.

Is it then not wisdom for a government to see information as a profitable product that must be invested in? If a local government must achieve meaningful development in its communities, it must be alert and responsive to

the need to liberate its people from economic quagmire, socio-educational dormancy and political adamancy. The people must be re-awakened to participate actively in community development and to take up the cross of self-advancement. According to Richard Gibeon³, victory here depends upon winning the people to a cause that is both material—in an immediate political, economic and social sense—and moral, in the highest sense in directing man's efforts to give his existence dignity. But how can the people be won when they do not know the cause being pursued? How can they know when they are not informed?

A corollary to this is that in spite of how hard a government may be striving to make life meaningful for people, the people can still be passive, ungrateful and even cynical of the government's intentions and actions. Realizing this, the Federal Government of Nigeria in 1986, through the then information minister—Tony Momoh—called on local governments to set up information booths in their communities. The vision was that through the booths the citizens would be properly informed of governments' policies and projects. They would consequently be mobilized to identify with development efforts. At this point, one may be wondering whether this would not be a duplication of the functions of National Orientation Agency (NOA). It is not. NOA employs only speech medium the impact of which

Is only on people present and is often ephemeral. An information centre goes far beyond speech to the documentation and preservation of the information and communicates it not only to people present but also to future generations. There is also room for consultation of the information anytime, with the result that if the information does not make its impact today, it can make it tomorrow. The information centre itself is a development project which leaves very good impression in the minds of the people. It has permanence in communities.

Additional truth that underscores the importance of information centres in communities is that they have greater potential to reach more people than the mass media known for communicating information to masses of people. It is certain that a large number of people in rural communities has no radio sets, and the few who have may not afford the cost of keeping the sets always talking. In such communities, newspapers and magazines are rarely seen. Also, television sets cannot be owned in many of the communities owing to either poverty or absence of electricity. The local government may not have the money to provide electricity for the communities, and it will be impractical for it to buy radio and television sets and be buying newspapers for everybody so that its policies, plans and activities which are being publicized in these media can be made known to

the people. On the other hand, it is feasible for the local government to establish in each community an information centre in which only a few radio and television sets and one copy of each newspaper and magazine title can serve the community satisfactorily. The centre only requires a small electricity generating plant.

Furthermore, a local government may be incapacitated to execute projects capable of improving life. Election promises may be difficult to fulfill. Ongoing projects may suddenly come to a halt. In situations like this, the local government may not escape the tittle-tattle and calumnies of a dissatisfied populace who is untutored about the reasons for under-performance. It may sometimes be that the government's policies or plans or projects are not acceptable to the people because of the people's parochial knowledge. Again, as J. W. de Grant Johnson pointed out in his book *Towards Nationhood in West Africa*: often, communities have

men of high mental calibre with wide sweeping influence and outstanding personalities, at all times ready to grapple with the most intricate problems of politics and administration; men and women too—with their courage in their hands, with forensic ability and great business acumen, who while willing to combine with the Government to work...are not prepared to tolerate or participate in any plan, policy or programme whatsoever, that does not appeal to them.⁴

What the local government should do in any of the above-stated scenarios is not to assume the air of offended dignity and go about a press war or witch-hunting or even open confrontation with people. The best thing to do is to explain issues and keep on explaining until the situation changes, lest the people be misinformed by enemies of the government. These explanations can be made both by a meet-the-people approach and through occasional publications and recordings which are kept to be read and listened to in the information centres. This does not imply that the government should drift into what Johnson⁴ called "the doubtful practice of opportunism." That is, making false explanations for government's inactivity only to misappropriate available resources.

One other element in favour of community information centres is that when citizens watch pictures of rulers on television screens and in publications, they will be able to identify the rulers wherever they see them ordinarily even many years after their tenures. This is necessary because, like in India where "the identity horizon of most villagers rarely extends beyond the narrow range of personal encounter,"⁵ in Nigeria, many people have very narrow chance of attending meetings and ceremonies where rulers are present. The result has been that a lot of Nigerians cannot identify the chairmen and councillors of the local govern-

ment areas and wards of their residence.

Establishment of a Community Information Centre

Why community information centre instead of community library?

It is cheaper to establish a community information centre than to establish a community library. A community library is expected to have all that make a library and all that a community information centre *per se* should possess. A community information centre cannot give full library service, but a community library can give satisfactorily the services of a community information centre.

The following are descriptions of the basic things which ought to be provided for an information centre to exist in a community for the community.

ACCOMMODATION

Ideally, there should be a building particularly designed for the function. Nevertheless, a great impact can still be made from a one or two-room apartment in a school building or a community /village hall or, as a last resort, in a building in the local government headquarters. Alternatively, a community development union or a club can be persuaded to volunteer its building or part thereof.

EQUIPMENT

A community information centre's equipment basically comprises furniture, audio and video recorders / players, large-screen television set, file cabinet, cupboard, shelves and catalogue cabinet (Figure 1a). to reduce cost, catalogue trays (Figure 1b) can be improvised in place of a catalogue cabinet.

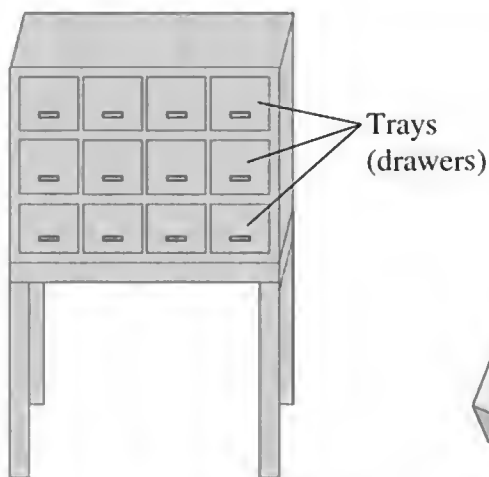


Figure 1a: A catalogue cabinet

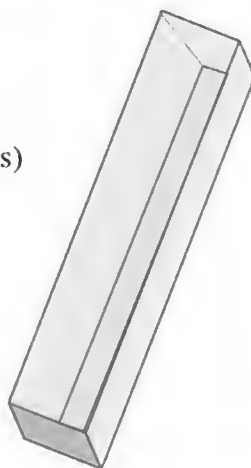


Figure 1b: A catalogue tray (made of wood or hard paper)

INFORMATION SOURCES

There are various media through which information that can lead to a positive change in behaviour can be communicated. These include printed materials, radio, television, as well as audio

and video cassettes.

Printed Materials

Books are famous for communicating knowledge and ideas which shapes man's destiny. Many handbooks, manuals, leaflets, pamphlets and their like are full of methods and data in various vocations and issues of relevance to communities. Their roles in modifying people's attitudes and levels of participation in politics and development is enhanced by the fact that they also can be produced locally to reflect practices, problems and prospects in the community, which will form the basis for discussions and improvement in the future. By these means as well, the local government should publicize its policies, plans and projects.

The impact of pamphlets and leaflets particularly, as well as posters and pictures in promoting health, literacy, farming, co-operatives and craftsmanship, is prominent. For example, in a UNESCO's experimental nutrition project in Brazil in 1982; posters, pictures and flannel boards were used to induce dialogue in an attempt to stimulate community interaction and self-reliance. According to the report,

The project appears to have increased the sense of community and engendered a change in villagers who previously perceived themselves to be helpless and controlled by fate.⁶

So, the above materials when kept in the community information centre can be borrowed for use in development project campaigns.

Newspapers and magazines are other printed materials whose pages often contain societal problems and their solutions, government policies and plans, health matters, new methods in agriculture, community development efforts, and lots more. Along with others materials, they should be regularly kept for literate people to read. Information centre staff can help illiterate people to benefit from newspaper and magazine contents through organised discussion groups.

Other important printed materials are dictionaries (of different educational levels), trusted encyclopaediae, telephone and trade directories, good atlases, local wall maps, company bulletins and newsletters. There are also brochures and bulletins of institutions of higher education, which are excellent guides for community members aspiring to acquire further education.

Radio and Television

In the People's Republic of China, communities have loudspeaker systems which extend radio reception to an entire village.⁷ This typifies the importance of radio as a medium of information or communication. In fact, radio had been described as a "social mobilizer", as it stimulates

participation in development programmes.⁸ Just like the television, radio plays great role in health education, literacy campaigns, promotion of agricultural practices, career guidance and social education. It also stirs people to be alive to their civic responsibilities. Radio and television sets in a community information centre ensure that the less privileged members of the community listen to radio and television broadcasts.

Audio and Video Cassettes

It is well known that most radio and television broadcasts are not made more than twice. Still there are many very important news items, announcements and documentaries that are not repeated at all. There is, therefore, no mistake in saying that many people miss radio and television messages which can improve their conditions and those of their communities and nation. It is either they are not by a radio or television set when the broadcasts are made or they do not quite understand all that is contained in the messages.

If broadcasts are closely monitored and taped, they can be listened to or watched at anytime. These taped broadcasts can be used in future to stir up action for self and community rehabilitation.

The role of audio and video cassettes in direct development campaigns, as well as in skill acquisition and improvement, is of more interest. A few of the experiments carried out in nations of

the world elucidate this fact.

In Tanzania, audio cassette listening fora organised to train women in the skills necessary to improve their families' daily lives, have been extremely effective in changing attitudes of both literate and illiterate participants.⁹ Integrated Rural Project in Education, Health and Family Planning for farm workers in Honduras made creative use of audio cassettes to improve literacy and encourage family planning. In the project, participants listened to open-ended audio dramatizations which they would discuss and conclude. This resulted in several behavioural changes, which included an increase in functional literacy and community action in improving sanitation.¹⁰

In Peru, video cassettes are being used to mobilize rural farmers for agrarian reform. Each day, 18-minute video presentations are made at a local extension unit, followed by a discussion accompanied by a review of supplementary printed materials.¹¹

A community information centre is to be a reservoir of audio and video cassettes which contain information that can be used to improve agriculture, to fight the ills of social underdevelopment and to encourage good health and self-help. Audio and video cassettes are invaluable in publicizing government's development policies and programmes. Policies and plans can be explained repeatedly through taped interviews and reports. Video documentaries

of completed and on-going projects have great potential to arouse in their viewers a conviction to support the government. They impart a clearer understanding of the use of taxes, rates and property licences, and in this way, they make citizens willing to pay even exigent levies.

Furthermore, the impact of video recording of social events—like national day celebrations and sports competitions—is far reaching. Local government officials should be believed that when citizens, especially the young ones, participate in such occasions and later watch themselves on television screens, they are likely to have a good impression of the government. So, the part audio and video cassettes play in popularizing the government cannot be overstressed.

Staff

Like a well-finished car—with all its superlative features and enormous potentials to serve the purposes for which it is made—but which cannot function without a driver, all good intentions, efforts and money spent in providing all the items mentioned above will be undermined if there is no person charged with putting them to most beneficial use. The person must, however, not be an old floating staff member for whom the information centre is now merely providing a desk and an office. The person must not be a “never-do-well” whom the management wants to keep out of sight.

The community information centre manager must be intelligent, articulate, creative and resourceful. He/she must be enthusiastic and, above all, relevantly trained—trained not only in information preservation and dissemination, but also in information collection and generation. The person should be knowledgeable in administration of special libraries and information centres. In spite of the outstanding abilities of the person, there is still need for several assistants. The assistants are usually vested with routine duties and ought to have such duties at their finger-tips.

Maintenance of Community Information Centres

When an information centre is successfully established, it is expected to achieve the goals set for it. There is, of course, no doubt that it will do so, so long as the resources necessary are available, in good condition and in their required amounts. Even when a centre is a model at the time of its establishment, many of its resources are bound to depreciate in value in time. So, if from the basic sources of information a clear and useful line of reciprocal communication is really established between the government and the governed, bringing the expected improvement in the lives of the people;¹² if people at the grass roots must be mobilized by constant information to play their

set roles;¹³ information centres set up to in communities to guarantee the constancy of information must be constantly maintained.

Conventionally, a sponsoring authority would not require much, if any, persuasion to renovate a worn-out building, to repair a leaking roof, or to expand a tight accommodation. These occasional responsibilities, therefore, need not be harped on. There are other aspects of a community information set-up which call for constant attention. These include the equipment, information sources, staff welfare and services.

As the television and radio sets, audio and video cassette recorders and, probably, cine equipment are being used, they should be kept in good working conditions always. Servicing should be done when they ought to be done, and repairs are to be carried out without delay. It is also important to recognize technological changes and not be aloof to the need for replacement of an item which is becoming obsolete. Newspapers, magazines, bulletins, newsletters and relevant journals should be acquired regularly. Keeping track of new methods and implements/tools in agriculture, education, craftsmanship, sports, politics and so on, is another profitable commitment. In this regard, more and more cassettes, handbooks, pamphlets, posters, pictures and other printed materials will continually be needed. Of course, as the local government strives to give first-hand, up-to-date information about its development programmes

and about development activities of people in its area, these information sources will be increasing in quantity. This calls for more storage facilities.

Staff welfare is not a new concept. It pervades the whole of the relationship between employers and their employees, on one hand, and between employees and their jobs, on the other hand. What will be surprising rather as it regards an information centre in a community is the extent of damage which will result from negligence of duty toward staff training and promotion, prompt payment of wages, and maintenance of appropriate workforce.

Service policies and strategies need to be flexible. This need rests on the fact that a different approach may be necessary to achieve a better result in a particular situation. For example, the initial intention may be for people to be going to the centre, but where the centre is not easily accessible to many, there should be a plan to arrange gatherings at spots away from the centre. The larger the community is, the more frequent such outings will be. Information materials can be lent to individuals and groups who may want them for use in their homes or projects. In consequence of this, reasonable multiplication of information documents will be a worthwhile expenditure.

Considering all that had been discussed so far under maintenance, it is apparent that sufficient funds have to be allocated annually to

community information centres. This is to avoid a situation where the centres will become distressed or come to an abrupt end.

Conclusion

Information is very important in all aspects of human and community development. If the grass roots must be able to work zealously toward societal and their individual well-being, they must be mobilized through relevant, constant and adequate information. The role of community information centres in these directions is not questionable. Any money spent in establishing the centres and in keeping them optimally functional is money well spent.

References / Notes

1. Kosi A. Kedem. The importance of information control elements in the implementation of Ghana's Economic Recovery Programme (ERP). *Leading Libraries and Information Centres*, 1 (1), 1993. p. 23.
2. Alan Hancock. *Communication Planning for Development: An Operational Framework*. Paris: UNESCO, 1981, p. 11.
3. Richard Gibeon. *African Liberation Movements: Contemporary Struggles against White Minority Rule*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 14.

4. R. W. de Grant Johnson. *Towards Nationhood in West Africa*. 2nd ed. London: Frank Cass & Co., 1971, p. 71.
5. Robert L. Hardgrave, Jr. *India: Government and Politics in a Developing Nation*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1970, p. 184.
6. Hamid Mowlana and Laurie J. Wilson. *Communication, Technology and Development*. Paris: UNESCO, 1988, p. 22.
7. Ibid.
8. Ishola Folorunso. *Grassroots Broadcasting in Nigeria*, p. 9. Quoted in Hamid Mowlana, *Op cit.*, p. 23.
9. Academy for Educational Development, Clearing House on Development Communication. *Audio Cassette Listening Forums: Tanzania*. Washington, D.C.: Academy for Educational Development, Clearing House on Development Communication, 1982.
10. Id. *Integrated Rural Project in Education, Health and Family Planning: Honduras*, 1983.
11. Id. *Video-Based Training for Rural Development: Peru*, 1983.
12. B. U. Ugwoke. *Library: A Bank of Knowledge*. Enugu: News Service Communications, 1992, p. 26.

13. "Information Booths" (an editorial on Nigeria's Information Minister Tony Momoh's pronouncement for establishment of information booths throughout Nigeria). *Nigerian Tribune*, June 30, 1986, p. 2.





Nigeria Information & Documentation Network